



Welcome to Weiser World

Opportunity, Not the Bell, Dictates the School Schedule in this High-Desert Idaho District

The Weiser School District was not always a believer in the promises of video conferencing (VTC). In the 1990s, the small Weiser community of western Idaho dared to try an exciting and cutting-edge training concept that promised to diminish costs, cut travel time and otherwise mitigate the challenges of educating and retaining a workforce in a small community far removed from urban conveniences and centers of knowledge. The concept was distance learning over two-way audio/video connections, and the systems at the time required a lot of equipment, the ISDN lines over which the data travelled were expensive and—adding insult to injury—they discovered that there wasn't much training content available once all the

pricey gadgetry and circuitry were in place. As it turned out, Weiser got burned. For

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over a decade, those grandiose VTC plans went into dusty dormancy.

Courage to try the IEN has paid off

Flash forward several years and today Weiser School District

today is one of the state's true pioneers in this dynamic new movement of VTC-delivered education.

What happened?

For starters, the technology evolved and now transmits over Internet connections, becoming better-quality, more affordable and simpler to use. Furthermore, they found a good partner in Boise State University's Larry Selland College of Applied Technology, the institution with whom Weiser gave VTC another, more promising attempt. Finally, they found a second great partner, this one



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The Transformative Potential of the IEN Is “Pretty Awesome”

If you watched Governor Otter's annual State of the State and State of the Budget Address a few weeks



ago, you know that it streamed live via the IEN to classrooms across Idaho.

Specifically, students in Twin Falls High School, Sugar Salem High School, Jerome High School, Weiser High School and Bear Lake High School virtually

“attended” the address.

If you watched, you also know that the governor talked about the impact of the IEN. He used words like “empowering students,” “expanding the horizons of

students,” giving opportunities to students “who might otherwise never get the chance,” that the network “will make a big difference for access to education” and offer students “dual-credit enrollment programs that offer a leg-up on higher education.” He didn't forget the wider community benefit of the IEN: “It also is about bringing employment opportunities to our communities, making government more efficient, accessible and responsive, and opening up the wider world to all our citizens.”

I don't know about you, but hearing the governor's words—and knowing that they are true because I have the privilege of seeing these kinds of transformations every day

as the IEN implementation continues to unfold—was exciting. Or, in the words of Stephanie Maughan, a 16-year-old from Twin Falls High School who watched the governor's speech over the IEN: “Pretty awesome.” That's what she told a reporter from the Twin Falls *Times-News* and I couldn't agree more.





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like winning the lottery: the Idaho Education Network (IEN). The IEN has embarked upon an ambitious plan to bring bigger bandwidth and VTC capabilities, along with free proctor and content-origination training, to every school in Idaho, and Weiser is one of the first recipients of the state's forward-thinking generosity.

Nothing to lose and everything to gain

There's a final reason to why and how this happened. Weiser simply has gumption. This four-school district of 1,600 students has sticktoitiveness. It has the spirit to try and try again. As a rural school district it has, according to Weiser High School Principal Dave Davies, not all that much to lose and everything to gain from world-flattening, game-changing educational technologies such as VTC.

"VTC is something I'm extremely excited about," says Davies. "I've been in education for 18 years and have never seen an opportunity like this. This is an amazing opportunity for kids that want to challenge themselves academically and learn more and advance further in their

careers and lives. Many urban students have had these kinds of opportunities for years, but rural students like mine haven't."

A life invested in the community

With the majority of his career spent in the district, a wife that teaches there, four

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kids enrolled in it and himself an '86 alum, Davies literally has invested his entire personal and professional life in Weiser. If VTC offers opportunities to his kids—both his own children and the hundreds of others whose education he's ultimately responsible for—from the world beyond the bounds

of this high-desert, agricultural community located 75 miles west of Idaho and known for onions, sugar beets and hay, Davies is one educator that's going to take it.

Two and a half years ago, Weiser chose to ignore the disappointments of the past and decided to experiment with workforce training over VTC with Boise State University's Larry Selland College of Applied Technology. It worked out so well, Weiser jumped at the chance to be a pilot school for the IEN implementation. Now Weiser has a VTC system in both the elementary and high schools.

Through VTC, "our students have been to the Sea Life Center in Alaska, Royal Botanical Gardens in Ontario, NASA and other virtual field trips. The teachers love it and the kids think it's really, really neat," says Davies.

In the high school, students are taking dual-credit courses in Western Civilization 1, 2 and College Algebra through the College of Southern Idaho. Besides expanding his district's curriculum and

enhancing educational opportunities, Davies points out that these courses only cost the students \$65 per credit, “a huge, huge savings to students and parents because college credits usually cost \$250 or more. And those that don’t have the ability to pay can apply to the state for scholarships for one class each school year.”

Through a partnership with Emmett High School in nearby Emmett, ID, his students can take another dual-credit course, Psychology. In turn, Emmett students can take Holocaust Literature from Weiser teacher Michele Chavez, whose course has proven very popular at both Weiser and Emmett. Currently Chavez also teaches Communications 101 for dual credit to Weiser students in a traditional classroom and plans to offer the course to other Idaho high schools next year over the IEN.

What’s good for the schools is good for the community

“VTC is so powerful,” says Davies, “we’ve really tried to promote its use in the larger Weiser community.” In coordination with the Weiser Chamber of Commerce, the high school has been inviting the public to important “beamed-in” broadcasts such as President Obama’s November 2009 health care message. A large Boise hospital recently hosted a health forum and local hospital administrators were able to participate over VTC, saving them the three-hour drive to Boise from Weiser. Right now a dozen Weiser residents are taking a professional development course via VTC with Idaho State University, their second such course. The police and fire departments are using VTC for training and certification. All have saved time and money using VTC.

Says Davies, “I’d be happy if the community was using VTC in some capacity every night of the week. Before VTC, it was not unheard of for school administrators to drive to Boise two or three times a week. We can save businesses and parents tons and tons of time and money by eliminating the need to drive, pay for meals and lodging, etc.” High school students are using the VTC system three out the seven periods each day and Davies vows to fill the rest soon.

The school board is more than on board


His school board and Superintendent James Reed agree and Davies says he

can’t emphasize the importance of their support enough. Davies believes it’s this support that is the critical difference between schools like his with successful VTC experiences and those that don’t. “Adopting VTC can be very difficult if you let your schedule or expectations dictates what happens rather than letting the opportunities dictate your schedule,” explains Davies. “Here’s how we choose to look at it. If a student is going to be taking part in an advanced learning opportunity

such as taking a class we don’t offer, taking a college-credit course or going on an interesting virtual field trip, we’re going to make our schedule flexible so that the student can meet the schedule of whoever is originating this content.”

A focus on what’s gained, not maintaining the status quo

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IDAHO

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

ISAT Regional Test Administration Training to Be Offered Over IEN on Feb.19

Thanks to the robust bandwidth and video conferencing capabilities of the IEN, your district can get Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) administration training quickly and more conveniently! The Idaho State Department of Education (ISDE) in conjunction with Data Recognition Corporation (DRC) will be providing Regional Training Sessions for all districts—just one more example of time- and money-saving opportunities that the IEN is bringing to Idaho.

Who Should Attend?

All District Test Coordinators along with **up to three** School Test Coordinators from each district.

When and where will it be held?

The training will be held Feb. 19, 2010, via video conferencing at the following sites:

- **Northern Idaho:** Grangeville High School, Feb. 19, 7:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. PST
- **Eastern Idaho:** Idaho State University, February 19, 8:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. MST


What is the agenda?

The training sessions will focus on:

- ISDE update on ISAT changes
- Uploading and editing student data
- Preparing for testing
- Reviewing new and updated policies
- Administering the ISAT
- Post-test activities

How do I register?

To register or for more information, please contact the ISAT Project Team at ISAT@datarecognitioncorp.com.





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As an example he cites his son, a junior who is taking Western Civilization over VTC. Three days a week he and his classmates come to school a half hour early to take the class and arrive at their next regular class 20 minutes late. “We don’t look at it like these students are missing their English class. These students are still responsible for making up whatever they miss. We look at it like they’re trying to take another class, expand their education and improve themselves.”

The right proctor is critical

Another clear sign of the board’s support is the paraprofessional resource the high school has hired to coordinate and proctor distance-learning experiences.

“Renee Sweet has been very instrumental in the success of this program,” explains Davies. “She’s very organized, she keeps the students’ schedules straight, she’s in communication with college professors or the teachers at other schools, she proctors tests and quizzes.” She along with teacher Michelle Chavez received their training over the VTC. As a bit of advice to other schools interested in implementing a robust VTC program like his, Davies says, “having that right adult person that’s going to be there to support the kids through it is invaluable. It’s less about technological acumen and more about organization and rapport with the students, but if they need to shape up, she makes them shape up.” Fortunately, the IEN can help with that as well through its free proctor training.

Letting opportunities dictate the schedule

“The Weiser school board agrees with me,” says Davies. “VTC and other demonstrably effective technologies are all about new and exciting opportunities. That’s what’s driving us, whether we’re talking about school or the community.”

He explains. If only ten people from the community show up for a VTC-broadcast event, the administration does not look at that as poor turnout or a failure. “We just want to provide the opportunity,” says Davies. “I would judge the success of VTC not by how many people participate, but how many events we’re able to offer that would be impossible without technology.”

“This school district isn’t going to tell students that are eager for further learning, ‘We’d love for you to take that class but it doesn’t fit our bell schedule.’”

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